

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 12, 2026

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

The Honorable Marco Rubio
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Kennedy and Secretary Rubio:

We are writing to express serious concern over the decision to withdraw the United States from the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 22, 2026.¹ WHO plays a critical role in alerting the United States and the world to emerging threats, containing dangerous pathogens, and preventing the spread of disease across the globe. As a founding member of WHO in 1948, the U.S. has served as a leader in global health, contributing significantly to many of its greatest achievements: increasing routine vaccine access from 5% of infants in 1974 to 84% worldwide in 2024;² leading global efforts to eradicate the smallpox virus;³ and coordinating the international response to major outbreaks such as Zika in the Americas, Ebola in West Africa, and COVID-19 across the globe.⁴ This shortsighted and reckless exit diminishes U.S. leadership globally and puts the country at increased risk from public health and biosecurity threats.

The U.S. withdrawal from WHO makes Americans less safe from infectious diseases by limiting access to information about emerging threats. As a member of WHO, the U.S. participated in, and had access to, vital disease and health care tracking systems, including: the Global Surveillance and Monitoring System for substandard and falsified medical products;⁵ the Early Warning, Alert and Response System for diseases emerging from humanitarian emergencies;⁶ and the Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS), a critical system for monitoring flu activity and developing flu vaccines.⁷ According to the President of the Infectious Diseases Society of America, Dr. Ronald G. Nahass: “Global cooperation and communication are critical to keep our own citizens protected because germs do not respect borders.”⁸ The decision to withdraw limits our real time access to data on emerging pathogens, hampers research and slows our ability to respond to future threats.

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/press-room/united-states-completes-who-withdrawal.html>

² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)00850-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)00850-X/fulltext)

³ <https://www.nfid.org/the-triumph-of-science-the-incredible-story-of-smallpox-eradication>

⁴ <https://www.who.int/campaigns/75-years-of-improving-public-health/milestones#year-1948>

⁵ <https://www.who.int/who-global-surveillance-and-monitoring-system>

⁶ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/surveillance/early-warning-alert-and-response-system-ewars>

⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2026/01/20/g-s1-106126/trump-world-health-organization-withdrawal>

⁸ <https://www.idsociety.org/news--publications-new/articles/2026/statement-on-u.s.-withdrawal-from-who>

The U.S. withdrawal also raises the risk of biosafety and biosecurity threats for Americans. Following smallpox eradication in the 1980s, the only remaining smallpox virus samples are located at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta and in Russia's State Research Centre of Virology and Biotechnology. Per international agreement, WHO controls research related to the smallpox virus, sets standards for how the U.S. and Russian repositories are managed and protected, and governs the inspection and compliance agreements for the U.S. and Russia. In the past, CDC staff participated in inspections of the Russian stockpile. By withdrawing from WHO, the U.S. has lost its voice in these and other critical decision processes that govern these smallpox stockpiles and other biosafety and biosecurity frameworks. When the U.S. fails to comply with its obligations under international agreements, it opens the door for Russia to choose not to comply, as well.⁹

Lastly, as part of the withdrawal, the U.S. is refusing to pay its outstanding debts to WHO, totaling nearly \$280 million for 2024 and 2025. The abrupt nature of this decision, without a clear transition plan, risks disrupting critical health programs across the world that rely on predictable U.S. funding. These disruptions could lead to worsening health outcomes, economic challenges and even political instability in countries where WHO operates. Dr. Judd Walson of Johns Hopkins University said: "As countries experience worse health—more mortality and morbidity—economic conditions worsen as sick populations can't work, and the economic situation of already poor countries deteriorates further. Political instability follows, with mass migration, war, and conflict, and now things start spilling over borders."¹⁰ In other words: any perceived short-term cost savings pale in comparison to both the human and economic costs of slower detection of disease, diminished control of outbreaks, and worsening global health.

This reckless decision to leave WHO puts Americans at risk. Beyond the immediate damage to public health and biosecurity, withdrawing leaves the United States weaker on the global stage. In its formal response, WHO stated that the decision will leave "both the United States and the world less safe," emphasizing that the organization remains impartial and acts with respect for national sovereignty.¹¹ In the same statement, the organization has made clear that it remains open to U.S. reengagement – an invitation the U.S. would do well to seriously consider. While bipartisan advocates acknowledge WHO warrants reform, retreating from this institution diminishes American leadership at a moment when sustained engagement is critical to protecting U.S. interests and security.

We demand answers to the following questions about the short- and long-term implications of withdrawal from WHO.

1. Please describe the steps you have taken to fill the gaps in disease tracking and surveillance resulting from the lack of U.S. participation in the Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System and similar programs at WHO.

⁹ <https://www.idsociety.org/science-speaks-blog/2025/u.s.-exit-from-who-potential-impacts-for-smallpox-virus-biosafety>

¹⁰ <https://time.com/7357180/us-withdrawal-who-world-health-organization/>

¹¹ <https://www.who.int/news/item/24-01-2026-who-statement-on-notification-of-withdrawal-of-the-united-states>

- a. How much funding has the Department of Health and Human Services spent to replace disease tracking and surveillance capabilities previously performed by WHO?
 - b. How much funding does the Department of Health and Human Services anticipate will be required to fully replace disease tracking and surveillance capabilities previously performed by WHO?
2. What formal, coordinated, transition plan has the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of State developed to ensure continuity of global disease surveillance, outbreak reporting, and emergency response coordination following withdrawal from WHO?
3. Please explain what steps were taken to clarify agreements around the smallpox stockpile prior to the decision to withdraw from WHO.
 - a. Will the U.S. still recognize WHO governance of inspection and compliance agreements for the smallpox stockpile in the U.S.?
 - b. How will the CDC confirm that Russia is complying with its obligations relating to its own smallpox stockpile?
 - c. Will the CDC still be allowed to participate in inspections of the Russian smallpox stockpile?
4. Please provide a written justification for your failure to meet the financial obligations to WHO prior to withdrawal as required by 22 U.S.C. § 290c.

We appreciate your prompt cooperation in this matter.

Sincerely,



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



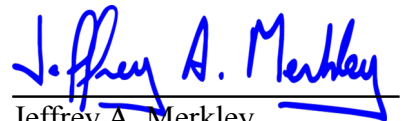
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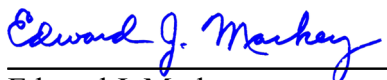
Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



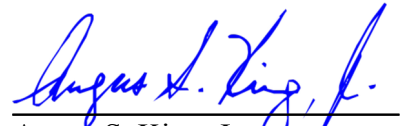
Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



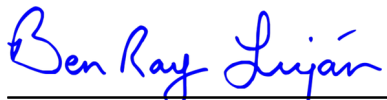
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Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



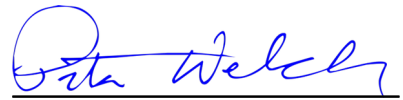
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Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Peter Welch
United States Senator